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ABSTRACT

The study presented here was designed to further the understanding of black student performance in biracial, academic settings. The purpose of the research was to assess the association between black students' perceptions of prejudice among white instructors and grade deflection (discrepancy between grade expected and grade received) in the respective courses. The first hypothesis was that there is a positive relationship between perceived instructor prejudice and incidence of grade deflection. Another hypothesis asserted that perceived prejudice is also positively related to grade deflection distance. The setting for the research was a Southern integrated university in one of the 20 largest cities in the U.S. Approximately 10 percent of the student body of just over 20,000 is black. During the Spring of 1971, all black students enrolled in sociology and anthropology courses completed questionnaires which provided the data for analyses. One hundred and ninety black students were asked their perceptions of racial prejudice among their respective instructors during the previous calendar year. Significant relationships were found between perceived instructor prejudice and both incidence of grade deflection and grade deflection distance. The controlled introduction of additional variables did not significantly alter the relationship.
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BLACK STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF PREJUDICE AND GRADE DEFLECTION*

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Abstract

This research focused on black student evaluations of their experiences with white instructors in an integrated, southern university. During the 1971 spring 190 black students were asked their perceptions of racial prejudice among their respective instructors during the previous calendar year. Significant relationships were found between perceived instructor prejudice and both incidence of grade deflection (discrepancy between grade expected and grade received) and grade deflection distance (number of steps between grade expected and grade received). The controlled introduction of additional variables did not significantly alter the relationship.

BLACK STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF PREJUDICE AND GRADE DEFLECTION*

Personal future planning implies that life is at least moderately predictable, that one knows and has confidence in himself and his capabilities and that he can exercise some control over life-shaping forces. Historically, predictability and control deficits have often limited future planning by blacks in the U.S. to survival-related objectives (Elkins, 1959) and other personally important but restricted goals. In a white-dominated society blacks adjusted by utilizing behavior patterns ranging from exaggerated servility to open hostility. Moreover, black perceptions of white attitudes and the nature of their interactions with whites have influenced black life styles and self images (Wright, 1945; Gregory, 1964), emotional stability (Grier and Cobbs, 1968), and black confidence in their abilities to project their individual and collective futures (Coleman, 1965; Gurin, et al., 1969; Simpson and Yinger, 1965: 130-178).

As mobility opportunities for individual blacks increase, aggressive future planning becomes increasingly realistic. Blacks, whose self images formed earlier in more restricted opportunity structures and who want to exploit mobility possibilities, engage in reappraisals of their personal characteristics and capabilities, and in efforts to extend control over their personal environments. These processes almost inevitably involve extensive changes in black-white interpersonal perceptual and behavioral patterns. Educational settings are particularly appropriate for studying black-white, social-psychological phenomena, since education is "often the only vehicle--to self-realization, to achievement, to jobs, and to status for Negro youth"

(Kvaraceus, 1965:91). The long range goal of this research and other studies to follow is to enhance black students' capabilities of and willingness to engage in aggressive future planning by extending knowledge of black-white interactional phenomena.

Background

Heretofore, much of the research on black-white interpersonal behavior has been conducted in educational settings. Katz and various associates have experimented with black and white student performances. Katz and Greenbaum (1963) found black students performed better under white testers than under black testers when the task involved mild threat and less well than with black testers when the threat was strong. Similarly, black students performed a difficult task under white experimenters when the task was not described as an intelligence test and less well than with black testers when the same task was presented as an intelligence test (Katz, Roberts and Robinson, 1965). In other research, Katz and co-investigators found, compared with whites, blacks more readily accepted white proposals, and talked more to white subjects than other blacks (Katz, Goldston and Benjamin, 1958; Katz, Henchy and Allen, 1968). Katz and Benjamin (1960) reported that when given proof of equal mental ability with whites, blacks, nonetheless, tended to see themselves as intellectually inferior to whites and reacted compliantly toward whites. These inhibitions were believed related to fear of arousing hostility in white teammates. As an extension, Katz and Cohen (1962) found, after a period of assertion training in biracial groups, blacks were better able to perceive their own abilities and make more accurate comparisons of themselves with whites. Katz, Robinson, et al. (1964) measured the expression of hostility and race of examiner. They noted that simple word tests that did not measure mental ability aroused little hostility, which was not

differentially directed at the two testers. When an intelligence test was given, hostility toward black examiners increased and hostility toward white examiners decreased. The authors concluded both changes were caused by the blacks' need to control expressions of hostility toward whites (Katz, Robinson, et al., 1964:58).

McPartland (1969) studied school and classroom desegregation and reported academic performances of blacks improved with increasing proportions of white classmates. Moreover, the degrees of improvement were greater in predominantly white schools than in largely black schools. Other researchers found black males were more affected by one year of desegregation experience than were black females (Veroff and Peele, 1969). Lefcourt and Ladwig (1965) concluded that blacks perform better in biracial settings when the tasks are related to roles with which they identify and with which they have had some previous successful experience. Katz (1964) reviewed research on the effects of desegregation on black student performances and identified three general social-psychological factors which influence black scholastic behavior. They are: (1) social threat (overt hostility, perceived overt hostility of whites, and lack of power parity with whites), (2) fear of failure, and (3) degree of perceived acceptance by whites. In general, the literature indicates that black performances in integrated, educational settings are importantly influenced by the nature and types of black-white interactions and perceptions.

The Present Study

The present research was designed to further understanding of black student performance in biracial, academic settings. We sought to assess the association between black students' perceptions of prejudice among white instructors and grade deflection (discrepancy between grade expected

and grade received) in the respective courses. The first hypothesis was that there is a positive relationship between perceived instructor prejudice and incidence of grade deflection. Another hypothesis asserted that perceived prejudice is also positively related to grade deflection distance. For example, if a "B" course grade were expected and a "D" received, the grade deflection distance would be two units. Because of interrelatedness of the two hypotheses, testing of the second hypothesis was dependent on prior supportive evidence for the first one. A number of other variables were controlled to gauge their effects on the hypothesized relationships. The variables controlled were academic aptitude, university academic performance, academic class level, sex, powerlessness, and perceived general, societal prejudice.

Method

The setting for the research was a southern, integrated university in one of the twenty largest cities in the United States. Approximately ten per cent of the student body of just over 20,000 is black. A large majority of the students are commuters and most of the state appropriations are based on course credit hour production.

During the spring of 1971 all black students enrolled in sociology and anthropology courses completed questionnaires which provided the data for the analyses. In most cases the forms were completed in small groups in the presence of the first author who is black. In all, there were 190 respondents.

Each respondent was asked to recall whether during the 1970 calendar year (spring, summer and fall semesters) he had had a white professor whom he (she) believed to have been prejudiced against blacks. If the response was positive, he was asked to identify the department and course involved and in case of more than one professor, to limit consideration to only one.

Then, he was asked to rank the instructor on a Likert scale from 1 (slightly prejudiced) to 5 (extremely prejudiced).

To gauge the influence of prejudice, the respondent was asked whether he believed the professor's prejudice (if already affirmed) influenced the course grade received and to express the degree of perceived influence from slight to tremendous (1 to 5). Then the respondent was asked to indicate the grade received in the course and the grade he believed (at the time of questionnaire completion) he would have received had the instructor not been prejudiced. As a partial guard against inaccurately ascribed grade deflection, the students' continuation in the courses and their completion of all exams were checked.

As an additional measure, a seven-item scale of perceived general prejudice was constructed (Appendix A). It was hoped that this scale, designed for black respondents, would better reflect black attitudes toward the larger society than Dean's (1961) more general powerlessness subscale which was also included. Social class was measured by Hollingshead's Two Factor Index of Social Position (1957). Academic performance was measured by cumulative grade point average at the time of questionnaire completion and academic aptitude was indicated by entrance exam scores.

Findings

Before evaluating the hypotheses, some descriptive data will be presented. The 190 respondents were fairly evenly distributed by academic class with freshman to senior representation of 47, 44, 45, and 54, respectively. The mean age of the sample was 20.7 with a range of 17 to 38 years. Regarding social class distribution, none was from the highest class level and only 11 (6 per cent) from Class II. There were 38 class III representatives, 72

students or 38 per cent in Class IV and 69 (36 per cent) from the lowest class. It is of some interest that 74 per cent of the respondents were from the two lowest classes.

The distribution of respondents according to perception of at least one prejudiced professor during 1970 (see Table 1) shows a majority had this experience. Also included in Table 1 are the estimated intensity levels of perceived prejudice. To facilitate the logical transition from perceived prejudice to grade deflection, the students who perceived prejudice were asked whether they believed the prejudice influenced their grades, and, if so, to what degree.[1] Of the 119 students who perceived prejudice, twenty reported no perceived influence on grades. Fourteen students who perceived their instructors to be prejudiced did not continue attendance and/or did not take all their examinations. Therefore, they were deleted from the portion of the sample with which the hypotheses were tested. For those who both perceived prejudice and perceived their grades influenced, the Pearsonian coefficient for intensity of perceived prejudice and degree of perceived influence on grades was .811. This finding is expectedly high but does add an increment of confidence in the internal consistency of the data.

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[1] For purposes of our research it was not important whether the perceived prejudice was actually present. We were interested in black student reactions to course grades when they believed the white instructor to have been prejudiced.

To measure grade deflection, each respondent was asked to indicate both the grade expected and the grade received in the particular course. Of those who reported perceived influence on grades, 89 reported negative grade deflections, i.e., their grades were lower than had been expected (see Table 2). One student reported prejudice influenced his grade but apparently not enough to lower his grade a letter since he did not report grade deflection. No one reported having received a grade higher than the one expected (positive grade deflection) and no one had expected a D or F grade.

The first hypothesis asserted a relationship between perceived instructor prejudice and incidence of grade deflection. The relevant data are presented in Table 3. To facilitate the use of chi square, the two lowest categories of perceived prejudice were combined. The results support the hypothesis ($p < .05$); grade deflection was disproportionately associated with perceived strong instructor prejudice.

To test the second hypothesis, perceived intensity of prejudice was related to grade deflection distance (see Table 4). A Pearsonian coefficient ($r = .491$) reveals a moderate association which is significant at the .05 level in support of the hypothesis.

The above relationship between perceived instructor prejudice and grade deflection distance was elaborated by introducing several other variables singly and noting the effects on the prior association. With the data divided into high and low academic aptitude categories, the Pearsonian

coefficients for the prior relationship were .437 and .540, respectively. These figures do not significantly differ, indicating academic aptitude had no major influence on the relationship between perceived prejudice and grade deflection distance.

When treated in similar fashion using other variables, the paired correlations did not differ significantly from each other at the .05 level. However, the variations may be of some importance without reaching statistical significance. The correlation between perceived prejudice and grade deflection distance was .442 for those with low cumulative averages and .577 for those with high averages. The correlation for freshmen and sophomores combined was .586 and .377 for juniors and seniors considered jointly. For males the correlation was .341, while it was .585 for females. The correlation was .365 for those who scored low on perceived general prejudice in society and .593 for those who scored high on the scale. For those who scored low and high on Dean's powerlessness sub-scale, the correlations were .442 and .580, respectively. To state these findings in summary fashion, the correlations between perceived instructor prejudice and grade deflection distance were higher among females, lower division students, those with high academic averages, those who scored high on powerlessness and perceived prejudice in the larger society and those with low academic aptitude scores.

Discussion

This research was designed to examine the reactions of black students to their perceptions of prejudice among white professors. Most of the respondents identified specific courses they took during 1970 in which they believed the instructors to have been prejudiced against blacks. In addition, all who perceived prejudice were able to (and did) assign levels of prejudice to their instructors.

Most respondents who identified instructors as prejudiced perceived corresponding influence on grades received in the respective courses. A strong correlation was found between levels of perceived intensity of prejudice and levels of perceived influence on grades. Because of the strong, logical relationship and the adjacency of the items in the questionnaire, this confirmatory evidence was expected and only its absence would have been surprising.

The major hypotheses were that perceived prejudice would be positively associated with both incidence of grade deflection and grade deflection distance. The data supported both hypotheses. Even so, the correlation between perceived prejudice and grade deflection distance generated a coefficient of only .491. It is believed that the correlation was not greater because of moderating strains within the phenomena involved. The professor's professional judgment, inculcated in graduate school and continually reinforced throughout his (her) career, would tend to reduce the number and size of discrepancies between ideally fair grades and grades assigned. In addition, students' abilities to perceive academic reality, a product of many years of schooling, should moderate unrealistic grade expectations (see Harrell, 1967). The operation of these factors should reduce the robustness of the relationship studied here. In sum, the .491 correlation may not be high, but it is believed to reflect important, stable social reality.

When other variables were controlled, the paired correlations varied but the differences were not statistically significant. Yet, it may be of some value to note that females, students who were in the upper half of the sample on cumulative grade averages, freshmen and sophomores, and those who scored high on powerlessness and perceived general prejudice generated higher correlations between perceived instructor prejudice and grade deflection than did their sample counterparts. We could only speculate on these findings.

Education is a highly valued means of black mobility and we were concerned with black students' responses to white instructors in an integrated university. First, we found that black students selectivity perceive prejudice among white professors. The individual black student's response to his perception of prejudice may take a number of forms. He could redouble his efforts to do well in the course involved. As an alternative, he may initiate disengagement techniques, withdrawing from the threat--either physically by not continuing class attendance or symbolically by becoming apathetic toward the course and completion of the related requirements.

Katz, Robinson, et al. (1964) found blacks attempted to control expressions of hostility toward white examiners. In other contexts and to much greater degrees in the past, blacks have sought to minimize negative white reactions by various accommodation patterns. Black accommodation patterns or survival techniques have included, in addition to careful obedience, harsh socialization of black children by their mothers (Grier and Cobbs, 1968), and fawning servility by blacks in interaction with whites--"Sambo" behavior (Elkins, 1959). To the extent these patterns are still operative, black students who sense prejudice and/or hostility on the part of white instructors would be expected to respond with reduced efforts and compliance.

Katz noted another influence on black behavior in integrated educational settings--fear of failure. If this factor remains potent even while efforts are decreasing in intensity in response to perceived white prejudice and hostility, its most ego-destructive effects can be forestalled by ascribing responsibility for poor course grades to professors perceived to be prejudiced. Our data do not refute or sustain this line of reasoning. Because of research resource limitations, only one wave of questionnaires was administered and the respondents were asked to recall experiences from the previous calendar

year. Consequently, causal direction cannot be established. That is, it is not clear whether the perception of prejudice preceded grade deflection, or whether the surprising receipt of grades lower than expected triggered the retrospective imputation of prejudice.

A better delineation of the dynamics of prejudice and related student behavior can be provided by utilizing additional survey stages. Black student perceptions of white instructor attitudes could be surveyed periodically during a semester with final measurements after receipt of course grades. A parallel opportunity is the study of white student perceptions of black professor prejudice in both predominantly white and largely black student bodies. In addition, extensions of this work could be conducted in elementary and secondary schools.

Knowledge enlarges the possibilities of control. As black students increase their capabilities of analyzing black-white perceptual and interactional matrices and learn to combine these analyses with enhanced self-understanding, our assumption is that they will be attracted to and prepared for aggressive future planning. Other social scientists are invited to participate in expanding the knowledge-understanding base and communicating the same.

APPENDIX

Perceived General Prejudice Scale

1. The real solution to racial problems in our nation is total integration.

   _____Disagree a little _____Agree a little

   _____Disagree on the whole _____Agree on the whole

   _____Disagree very much _____Agree very much

2. America is totally corrupted by white racism.
3. In order for black people to become free they must first recognize that white people are always trying to dominate and control their lives.
4. There are many white people who are not prejudiced and who sincerely believe that Blacks are equal.
5. All white American universities greatly discriminate against Blacks.
6. Only with the aid of white sympathizers have gains in racial equality been possible.
7. White American's ultimate aim in controlling the birth rate is black genocide.

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TABLE 1. PERCEPTION OF WHITE INSTRUCTOR PREJUDICE, BY LEVEL OF PREJUDICE

Perceived Prejudice	Level of Prejudice	N	%
Yes			
	Extreme	17	14.3
	High	37	31.1
	Moderate	47	39.5
	Somewhat	12	10.1
	Slight	6	5.0
	Subtotal	119	62.6
No		71	37.4
	Total	190	100.0

TABLE 2. GRADE DEFLECTION

Grade Expected	A		B		C		D		F		Total
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N
A	0	0.0	7	36.8	9	46.8	0	0.0	3	16.4	19
B			0	0.0	32	68.0	14	29.7	1	2.3	47
C					0	0.0	9	39.1	14	60.9	23
D							0	0.0	0	0.0	0
F									0	0.0	0
	0		7		41		23		18		89

TABLE 3. PERCEIVED PREJUDICE AND INCIDENCE OF GRADE DEFLECTION

Perceived Instructor Prejudice	Grade Deflection				Total
	N	%	N	%	
Extreme	1	7.6	12	92.4	13
High	2	6.2	30	93.8	32
Moderate	7	15.9	37	84.1	44
Somewhat	3	27.2	8	72.9	11
Slight	3	60.0	2	40.0	5
Total	16		89		105

$X^2 = 8.7197$, df = 3, $P < .05$

TABLE 4. PERCEIVED PREJUDICE AND GRADE DEFLECTION DISTANCE

Perceived Instructor Prejudice	Grade Deflection Distance					
	0	1	2	3	4	Total
Extreme	1	1	8	1	2	13
High	2	13	16	0	1	32
Moderate	7	26	11	0	0	44
Somewhat	3	6	2	0	0	11
Slight	3	2	0	0	0	5
Total	16	48	37	1	3	105

$r = .491$, $p < .05$